

SERMON REFLECTION 16th October 2022 Luke 18:1-8 by Megan Cambridge

'Then Jesus told his disciples a parable to show them that they should always pray and not give up.'

With all that Luke tells us about the prayer life of Jesus, it is not surprising that some of Jesus' parables are about prayer, too. This morning in our Gospel reading we have one such example. A few weeks back we heard another example in Luke 11 when, in response to the disciples request for Jesus to teach them how to pray, he tells a story about a friend who needed bread to serve some unexpected guests who arrived in the middle of the night. Even though his friend was in bed for the night, he got up to help him because of his shameless audacity. Then Jesus said, "Ask and it will be given. Seek and you will find. Knock and the door will be opened." He reminded the fathers listening to him that they know how to give good gifts to their children. How much more does God love to bestow grace on those who ask. Jesus' teachings in Luke 11 and 18 call us to persistent, fervent prayer. As the author of James' epistle says, "The effectual, fervent prayer of a righteous person avails much."

Back to today's gospel; the story Jesus told, to keep us from being discouraged in prayer, is that of an unjust judge. There are two players in the story. There is the judge who, we are told, neither feared God nor respected people. He cared for nothing, not even his own reputation. There was also a widow who needed justice. We know that widows at this time were some of the most vulnerable people in society. They had no one to stand up for them. Judges should be equalizers. Think about our own symbol of justice depicted above the Old Bailey law courts in London; a blindfolded woman, in her right hand, the sword of power and retribution and in her left the scales of justice. Right is right and wrong is wrong. It doesn't matter how connected you are or how much money you have.

If the judge in Jesus' parable had feared God, he would have realized that he had a special obligation to the widow as her only line of defence. She needed justice and her only recourse was the unrighteous judge. She was summarily rejected but the widow would not give up. She kept coming. She made herself a nuisance. She was doggedly determined. Finally, in exhaustion, the judge did the right thing and made a judgement in her favour.

The lesson of the parable is not that God is reluctant to be bothered with our needs. The lesson is one of contrasts. If an unjust judge would answer the request of an unconnected widow, how much more will a loving, righteous, generous God hear the prayers of his people. God is our heavenly Father. We are not coming before a tyrant. We are coming before our creator who loves us.

Jesus prayed. Jesus prayed before he ate his meals, giving thanks to God, in times of victory, rejoicing in the Holy Spirit, in times of temptation and testing. He prayed with others and he often wandered off to pray alone. Jesus prayed before he made big decisions. He prayed at a wedding and he prayed at a funeral. Jesus prayed for his disciples and those in need. He prayed at his baptism and while he was on the cross.

Prayer is the means by which we develop our relationship with God. We do not come into prayer as equals. We come to God as the one who alone can meet our needs. We need a relationship with God more than we need anything else. Jesus challenges us to develop an intimate, deep, and personal relationship with God and the way we do that is to continue to talk to and with God in prayer. In prayer we search our hearts, give thanks, worship God's majesty, repent of our sins, submit to God's will and yes, of course, we make requests of God.

Luke tells us that Jesus is concerned that his disciples (and we) might get discouraged in their praying. He told the parable so they would **"always pray and never give up."** Jesus wants us to keep praying. Satan

doesn't. There is no shortage of examples in the Old Testament of persistent prayer. Remember Daniel who prayed three times a day in spite of a royal edict making prayer to God illegal. We have Hannah who prayed diligently year after year in spite of family drama. We have Hezekiah who took the threats from a looming enemy and spread them out before the Lord in the temple. We have Jacob who wrestled with God all night long and said, "I will not let go until you bless me."

Do we change God's mind when we pray? There is a mystery to prayer for sure. Why does one prayer result in a miracle when another seems to result in nothing? Most of the time, the results are somewhere in between. Prayer is not transactional; it is part of our relationship with God and relationships are multi-faceted and complex. Something that was said to me on my first placement when I was studying for Lay readership stuck; 'Never stop praying. You never know when you are just one prayer short of the answer.'

So do we change God's mind when we pray? Well there is, of course, God's unchanging nature. I have seen prayer described as like gazing at the stars. 'It is a good thing to do. It gives you perspective but don't think that your star-gazing changes the stars in any way.' Sometimes people say that prayer changes us, not God.

Then, of course, God is all-knowing, He has awareness of everything. Jesus said that God knows what we need before we even ask. (Matthew 6:7-8:) *'And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him'*. If God is all-loving and all-knowing, maybe the only appropriate prayer is a prayer of resignation to God's will. However, the same Jesus who said God knows before we ask also said, "Ask, seek, and knock." The tense of the Greek verbs used conveys the meaning of "go on asking, go on seeking, and go on knocking."

We know God can be moved despite his unchanging nature and his awareness of everything. Do you remember when God came to Abraham in Genesis to inform him of the looming destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah? Abraham asks God if he would spare the city if fifty righteous people were found there. It would not do for God to destroy the righteous along with the wicked. God agreed: If fifty people were found in the cities, the cities would be spared. Abraham asked, "What about forty-five?" God agreed. "What about forty? Thirty? Twenty? Ten?" An amazing negotiation happens. Abraham stopped asking at ten and there were in fact, not ten righteous people. Those who were righteous were led out. God does, however, allow Himself to be moved by Abraham's requests.

In a different situation in the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus didn't tell the disciples to simply "say a prayer", he told them to "watch and pray". Prayer, like any communication, involves diligence. We must 'wait upon the Lord'. We must do more than simply pray we must keep praying until our hearts are aligned with the heart of God. That's what we see Jesus doing in the Garden. He prayed fervently. He kept praying until He could embrace the will of God about the cross. He finally reached the point where He could say, "Not my will but Yours be done." So we need to learn to watch and pray until we too can say not my will but Yours.

Finally persistent prayer keeps us from drifting away. Jesus warned his disciples that tough days were coming. Prayer, quality time with God, gives us a chance to make sure we remain "on track".

To finish..... words from poetry, from Alfred Tennyson

More things are wrought by prayer

Than this world dreams of. Wherefore, let thy voice

Rise like a fountain for me night and day. **ALFRED LORD TENNYSON**